

Kenyan humanitarian brings message of hope and help to Spokane

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Nereah Obura (Partners for Progress)

By Judith Spitzer

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Nereah Obura sits quietly, sipping water and occasionally taking small bites of a muffin at a coffee shop on the lower South Hill. Having been in the United States less than 24 hours, her sweet smile belies what must feel like strange and unfamiliar territory – especially after a 20-hour flight from Kenya.

About a year ago, Obura was hired by Partnering for Progress (P4P) as a program coordinator in the Kopanga region of Migori, an impoverished area about 200 miles east of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya.

“What has really impressed me since I’ve been in your city is how clean it is,” she said. “And I was struck by the cleanliness of the Spokane River. And the architecture. The houses are very beautiful. I’ve not come across any slums.”

An Inland Northwest-based nonprofit and humanitarian organization, P4P has assisted Kenyans with health care, education, sanitation and water and economic development over the past decade.

Obura will be a keynote speaker at P4P's annual fundraiser Saturday at Mirabeau Park Hotel in Spokane Valley.

Obura said when she heard about P4P she became interested in working with the group because "what they are doing is lifting up the community," Obura said.

"I have always been passionate about helping communities move from one level to the next. When you look at the communities we help, they are trapped between poverty and ill health. Unless you address both, you will not be getting anywhere," she added.

Obura speaks three languages, is married and has two daughters.

"As P4P's woman-on-the-ground in Kenya, Nereah facilitates our programs, travels throughout our service area visiting project sites, liaisons with government officials and educators, interviews scholarship students and their families and monitors their progress, helps implement the water program, oversees the infant nutrition program and more," said Linda Hagen Miller, P4P's communication director. "Her passion for helping her fellow Kenyans and her dedication to P4P's mission make her invaluable."

P4P was founded 10 years ago by two Spokane women, Stacey Mainer and Sandy Ivers, who had traveled to a remote area of Kenya on a medical mission and were so stunned by the poverty and infant malnutrition that they decided they had to return.

Sitting around a dining room table in Spokane with friends and colleagues, the women formed a nonprofit and began organizing medical teams that would travel to Kenya biannually.

During the first visit in 2007, four Spokane-based volunteers worked at a small, understaffed, inadequately supplied clinic which treated a steady progression of severely malnourished infants, pregnant women, children and adults with malaria, diarrhea, debilitating skin conditions, poor nutrition and HIV/AIDS, Miller said.

Since then, significant strides have been made. P4P consistently organizes bi-annual medical/education trips to Kopanga to provide care and educate local medical providers. The organization raised funds to build and support a new medical facility in Kopanga, has installed clean water systems, implemented an infant nutrition program and funded scholarships for elementary and secondary school students.

Obura said she is excited about changes made by P4P and, when she looks at children in the nutrition project, she has hope.

“We take care of malnourished children,” she said. “I get excited when I see them progress from one milestone to the next.”

She remembered one child in particular. “I remember a girl named Flora. Her mother died immediately after giving birth to her, and she was left in the care of a mother who is over 70 years old,” she said. “When I looked at Flora when she came into the program, I couldn’t imagine that she would survive even one year down the line. And now you would not know that she is the same kid. When I look at Flora, I see a lot of hope.”

P4P’s scholarship program grants 26 secondary school scholarships every year to academically and economically qualified students, Obura said.

“They come in for interviews before they are enrolled into our program, and you hear their stories ... what they have to go through in their families, and then we get them to go through secondary education. And when I see them getting into colleges and university and being able to thrive, it makes me so happy,” she added. “We actually have five students in university.” While the Kenyan government technically pays for education, Obura said that is only good in theory.

“School is free – on paper. But the government doesn’t pay for electricity or water, and when those children go to school they’re still expected to buy books and supplies. And in some places children don’t get quality education.”

While Obura’s official title is program coordinator, Miller said she is much more than her title. “Obura is at the forefront of an emerging trend of female empowerment in Kenya,” Miller said. “Most Kenyan women marry by age 20 and in short time, have an average of four children. Even though 62 percent of Kenyan women are in the labor force, the majority work as subsistence farmers or hold menial jobs.”

“Not many people embrace women leadership, including women themselves,” Obura added. Miller said Obura stands out in a community that is traditionally male-dominated.

“Her rather unique career and background set her apart from most Kenyan women who are forced to marry young, have lots of babies and struggle to survive for the rest of their lives,” Miller added.

Helping other women rise up is high on Obura's list of priorities. She teaches women organizational skills, teaches business skills and shows them how to work through P4P to obtain grants to start or expand their business. She considers herself a role model.

"One thing I do is encourage these women to form groups based on common interests groups and then they can be trained on small business setups," she said.

At Saturday's fundraiser, Obura plans to talk about the progress P4P has made in the area, including a matching funds programs in which 104 families have received goats; 40 farmers who have received seed, fertilizer and training on agricultural methods; completed sanitation training for 26 villages in the area; a water source protection project that affected 135 homes; provided feminine hygiene kits to girls, enabling them to continue to attend school during their menstrual periods; and conducted the weekly Power of Milk Project serving malnourished children and education for caregivers about locally available nutritious foods. Obura is hopeful about her future, and the future of her fellow Kenyans.

"We would like to see communities that are free of malnourished children, communities that have access to secondary and university training, as well as access to clean water and sanitation facilities," she said. "And we would like to be able to have our community take care of its own issues, so that we don't have to only depend on donor funding."

"We're actually moving in the right direction," she said.